

Dancing With the Universe

by Marianne Knuth, 2004

I remember being in conversation with a friend of mine once, after I had already become infused with a deep and energetic sense of idealism, and need to work for a world that is more just, fair, equal... and he said, that he was willing to do this 'good' work, as long as it did not interfere with his need to have a house, a car, I think he might even have mentioned a pool. I challenged him as best I could that surely the work was more important than the material possessions we might have? But no. They were needed, and the work needed to be able to also provide these, or not be. I remember being quite shocked, though I came to realise that this perspective was more often than not the common one held wherever I went.

I since realised that being in a community of people who care less for outward possessions as signs of success, or signals for respect, makes it easier for me to travel down my particular path seeking for truth and beauty and for my way to bring these into form in the world. I don't want to imply that doing the right thing must inevitably lead to poverty, but I do want to establish that to me, doing what feels right for me, has become much more important than striving for dominant and established notions of success. And I have learned that it is much more rewarding, more fun, more fulfilling to venture down this path of not really knowing, of not having all the answers, of not working for a nice fat secure salary with perks, but working for what might be, for another way of living and learning together, that might include spiritual development, creative community, connection with nature; for a way of life that might actually work for all of us and the world we live in. Some call it an ambitious and naïve pursuit. I experience it as a truly rewarding way of living.

As I write I realise how hard it is for me to summarise what I feel defines me, what calls to me, what I am all about, and what drives my constant exploration and experimentation for a better life... Perhaps some of what I have come to believe is valuable to share. I will follow each belief with a little story or statement, and only then look back at the journey that led me to these beliefs.

I believe that life is sacred and should be met in that way (that includes each and every one of us humans).

I believe in working from the heart – as a way to meeting and connecting with people from a much deeper and richer place, as well as the only way to connect with the mystery of who we are, through which we may live a more inspired and directed life. It is how I tune into my path and my work, the path, and work that carry my name.

I am easily moved to tears. In fact so much that it used to embarrass me. I have – however – come to recognise it as an indicator of my Being connecting with something of essence – be it deep felt joy, compassion, grief, inspiration. Sometimes those feelings are my own – telling me something, at other times it is the joy or pain of another that reach out and touch me deeply. I have also realised that as I speak, and if in my speech I am moved to tears, it is okay – in fact it often brings the people I am communicating with, closer to me. We meet in another place – outside of mere intellect.

I believe each one of us is here for a reason.

How could I not believe this when my return to Zimbabwe was so devoid of rationale? It was a call that I simply had to heed. I had no choice. She was calling me. It was time to leave the life I had come to know, and create an African Learning Village, that was and is, an experiment in how we might also live. How we might create – and recreate – healthy vibrant communities in the midst of a country and continent viewed by the rest of the world as poor, as lost. I believe each one of us is here for a reason, and when you find it, and embrace it, your heart will sing, and you will be carried along by life as you follow here desire for your life.

I believe, that there are ways of doing things that are in tune with Life and ways that aren't – and that I need to continue to tune into Life, allowing 'her' to inspire and guide me in how to move forward.

In my experience there are processes of interacting with others, of managing organisations, of working with nature – that are life-affirming, and there are processes that stifle and limit life. I am on the constant look out for those processes, practices and

principles that support and nourish life, creativity, community, generosity. And I am finding them in practices that are democratic, inclusive, that value diversity and make space for spirit. I am finding them in the circle gathering in our African Village, in the organic farming methods for our fields and garden, in the way in which we invite people to trust themselves, to look for possibility, to explore and to experiment, and to learn from mistakes and failures, to spread their wings and follow their intuition and curiosity. I am still looking and learning to follow Life.

I believe in conversation, and in community and in what can happen when people get together with the intent to listen to each other, to learn from and with each other, to grow together, to create. Magic can happen when we truly connect.

It is as we come together, truly come together, that we continue to find expansive and nourishing ways of moving forward. It is critical, I think, because we can't solve our problems at the level, which they were created, since they were created by a small and fearful version of who we really are. It seems to me that when I meet with groups in community and true dialogue, we are more able to bring in the sacred, the joy, the light, the laughter, and in that we are also being reminded of the larger version of who we really are.

I didn't always believe this – or see the world from this angle.

My mother had always emphasised the importance of education, so as to be able to get a good job, so as to be able to look after myself and get the things that mattered to me. 'And then,' my mother would say, 'When you have your house, and your boat, and your Mercedes-Benz, you can drive down the street and choose any man you want. Leave the men alone until you have reached complete independence.'

In 1984 our family moved to Zimbabwe. I still remember the ride from the airport into Harare, the capital. I noticed how many trees there were in the city. It was beautiful. And it was hot, and it seemed like there were many more colours than I was used to from Denmark. Soon after our arrival we went to my grandparents homestead in Mhondoro in rural Zimbabwe. Since then I have been back and have loved it, but on this first journey I was shocked by all that wasn't as I was used to. My grandparents were not showering us

with Christmas gifts as my Danish grandparents used to, the toilet was a squat toilet outside!, the water we drank came from a well quite a distance from the homestead, the Christmas dinner was not the roast duck I had become used to, it was boiled chicken and roasted goat (for them a wonderful treat that they had prepared for us and all the many, many members of the family arriving from far and wide), and worst of all I did not speak the language, so I was just a silent witness to this bizarre vibrant African gathering.

And yet, though that memory stands so vividly, what I most recall was how happy I was over the next couple of years. We had bought a farm outside of Harare. I remember life at farm with lots of animals, and lots of scouting around out and about in the bush, as sweet and fun and rich. I remember coming to love and appreciate my Zimbabwean grandparents, who I admired for the agility and hard work that they were still engaged in, this late in life: up at 5 each morning, and then to work – tilling the land, collecting water, grinding maize, and whatever else their days contained depending on the season.

I loved it. I wasn't very conscious of loving it, or appreciating it specifically, but I did. I loved spending long hours alone walking across the farm, with our dogs. Me and the dogs and the quiet of the outdoor. I think this chapter of my life affected me more than I know. In subtle ways. It made Zimbabwe my soul home – the place where I felt truly home, where my body feels it belongs. And I have since come to realise how many important lessons she has taught me – during those early days and in the years that have followed. Lessons around the importance of spending time in nature, of being in community, perhaps simply of Being – with others.

At 16 I returned to Denmark. Alone. My grandmother invited me to come up for a summer educational programme, but through the ensuing conversations, we shaped it so that I returned for high school and subsequently university. My mother wasn't too pleased, but off I went. It seems that despite my Zimbabwean experiences I was still imprinted with the notion that the west was better and more advanced than Zimbabwe, and that it was 'cool' to be on this adventure.

My three years in high school went by fast, I enjoyed myself, played a lot, but also became increasingly puzzled at the notions of development, and progress, and wealth that I was coming to pay more attention to all around. I went home to Zimbabwe each

summer vacation and became more and more aware of the absurdity of the discrepancy between that which I was told to value, and that which I was told to pity. It was the wealth/poverty distinctions, and more specifically as they were played out in my grandmothers that struck me. My Danish grandparents were a reverse culture shock to me as I returned to Denmark. They seemed suddenly so cold and aloof in comparison to my Zimbabwean ones. So focused on money, and giving me good manners, and keeping up appearances, as opposed to simply spending some good time together. And in fact, over the next years, I realised that my Danish grandmother was actually not happy, though in the eyes of the world, she was beautiful, wealthy and intelligent. My poor dusty Zimbabwean grandmother, by contrast, was full of energy, life, vitality, love and joy (though her life was and still is tough and demanding). She still stands as an incredible inspiration to me for what true wealth might mean. And it has nothing to do with money. It was an observation I was to return to years later.

Once the three years of high school were over, I applied for business school, though that world really did not hold much attraction for me. I think I must have still held my mother's advice close to heart. I entered business school and worked hard. I enjoyed it, though I didn't love it. I think I got a kick out of the competitiveness and proving to myself and my teachers what I was capable of. That kind of motivation doesn't last, so for some classes, where I lost interest in the teacher, I quickly became quite lazy and disinterested. But overall I did pretty well, simply regurgitating everything I was learning about micro and macro economics, statistics, accounting, and so on. I never questioned some of the underlying assumptions that we were being asked to accept as law: that homo economics is a human being who is simply interested in maximizing his own profit and material wealth, that the complex world of human organizing can be summarized into people trying to maximize their well-being expressed through financial figures. It seems that most of us who had made it to the business school simply accepted these abstractions as the material we had to work with.

During my second year of business school, I joined AIESEC, which is an international association of students interested in business and economics. I joined AIESEC because I liked the opportunities it offered, for international exposure and experiences, and the chance to interact with the corporate world through diverse activities. I got caught up in

something that was much larger than an addition to my CV, which I think was my initial motivation.

It turned out that there were many sides to AIESEC. Internationally, there was a drive to shift the association from mainly being about creating international internship opportunities for students in business and economics, to becoming a more critically thinking student network, engaged in exploring issues relevant to their field of study. Its broader aim was contributing to building a better future for all. AIESEC in Denmark was quite against these developments, which in hindsight was a real gift to me, as it meant I suddenly needed to fight for my desire to bring these elements into play. It led me to work tirelessly to open up AIESEC to a broader role and possibility. And this was when I moved much more clearly into challenging what I was being taught at business school. For the first time, I began to look up alternative literature and realise that there was a world of new thought emerging, and that there were different ways of approaching the idea of business.

Two main elements stood out to me. First, a new science was emerging that was challenging our mechanistic understanding of the universe, which could have huge implications on the way we organize our businesses as well. Not as hierarchical command and control systems, but as living systems. What that would mean and how it might be tackled made for incredibly inspiring reading. Secondly, a lot of literature was simply raising the point of business being a member of the community in which it found itself, which comes with a responsibility to participate in nurturing and supporting the positive growth of that community, beyond simply making money. People were challenging the statement that “the business of business is business,” as a something not in the interest of business itself in the long run.

It was a shock, and it was a fresh breeze. And as I ventured further and further down that path, I became more and more stunned at the difference between what we were being taught at business school, and what I was learning through the work I was spearheading in AIESEC. I became involved in organising AIESEC’s international involvement in the World Summit for Social Development. We left the commas and the fullstops of the official document to others, and instead decided to bring together some of the amazing people we had met on our journey together at the Summit (at the NGO forum) to explore

the issues from alternative angles. We hosted three events at the summit with leading thinkers and practitioners. Hazel Henderson was challenging how we measure progress and success and, with a group of peers, making suggestions for alternative indicators to GNP that included consideration of social and ecological factors. Mahbub Ul Haq (the late) and Inge Kaul of UNDP were spearheading the Sustainable Human Development Index, also trying to develop and mainstream an alternative indicator that included a greater emphasis on human wellbeing. Jane Nelson of the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum was a great inspiration in her tireless efforts to bring the three sectors (business, NGO and government) together in creative, innovative and mutually beneficial partnerships. What they all had in common was that they were blurring the boundaries that I had been taught to believe in. They were asking questions and bringing forward models and ideas that held as a common element the understanding that we don't simply live in a world of money and economics. And that business and economists need to learn to look at the world through a lens that integrates social, ecological and human elements, in addition to economic ones.

I think I was learning more than I had during my first four years of business school. I was alive with passion and conviction and a sense of purpose. I felt like I was finally involved in something that for the first time seemed real, and was infinitely more educative. We read, we studied, we questioned, we were angry, we spoke, we wrote papers on our ideas, as they were being shaped by our gradually expanding sense of the world. We were fired up. It was wonderful.

That year I ran for one of the Director positions in AIESEC International. I wanted to bring my learning and much broader sense of possibility for AIESEC into the international association.

It was an interesting place we found ourselves. On the one hand, belonging to an organisation of students of business, and with that being well connected to the business world, and on the other hand, beginning to raise questions around business and some of its possibly inherent flaws. We found ourselves immersed into the niche of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): a movement that tries to find ways of enabling companies to accept a broader sense of their social responsibility, often by making a business case (improved stakeholder relationships, good public relations, motivated employees, etc.).

Today, I find that the whole area of Corporate Social Responsibility is in many ways business' response to the pressures put on it by society. And in a sense, it is a co-opting of that pressure.

I was fiercely engaged in the issue for 3-4 years, until gradually I lost interest, because whilst there are genuine people in business – and in the NGO world – who are trying to push the agenda of CSR, essentially the bottom line remains the bottom line. The way to convince business to engage with CSR is to convince them that it is good for the bottom line. And in my view, a much more fundamental rethinking of the role of business in our societies and communities is called for here. Perhaps it is too much to expect such rethinking to come from those people in power, sitting comfortably where they are now. But it is not about trying to give a little back to society, as a way to be allowed to keep doing business as usual. It is about re-looking holistically at business and its role and place in our society.

I gradually woke up to a sense – an alarming sense – of business having crowded out so many other aspects of community and society; of business, in its mad quest for increasing growth, rushing ahead, trampling the very fabric of our societies in the process. Of business not being interested in a view that may ask that growth be slowed down, and consumption be limited to more of what we actually need, and less of what we have greed for – often under the influence of alluring and dazzling advertising campaigns. Despite my initial passion for CSR, my view of — and faith in — business declined quite substantially during this time. Year after year, I would attend conferences on CSR and meet the same people speaking the same words, but little seemed to move or change, at least from where I was standing. Perhaps we were looking at it from the wrong place?

Process as Important as Aim

... and perhaps the two can't truly be separated.

During my second year at AIESEC International, I went through one of my most profound re-learning experiences, and I began to understand the world anew. Before that, I had been infused with a desire to make a difference, to serve, to play a role in contributing to positive change. I saw other people as being a part of the problem, and wanted for myself

to be a part of the solution. However, I was just as caught up in the system that was (and still is) daily recreating a world that is not working for everyone. I was fighting the system tirelessly, but it stood just as firm as ever, and probably will for as long as we don't realise that what we need is a fundamentally different kind of approach. I had realised that it is not simply about the will or intention to do good, and it is not simply about deciding to deal with certain issues and find the solutions to them. At the core of changing my understanding about my work was changing my understanding of reality and, through that, changing how I engaged with reality – with people, with nature, with myself.

I had run for President of AIESEC International (because once again, I felt what I could bring in terms of vision and ideals was sorely needed) and I wondered what I had gotten myself into – never having been a committee president in AIESEC at either local or national levels. And perhaps that was my blessing. Perhaps also that I was the first female President in the almost 50 year history of AIESEC, and I wasn't entirely sure how to start. And so I asked those I knew for advice. A wonderful mentor recommended that I read Leadership and the New Science, by Margaret Wheatley. Her book brought it all together for me:

Real changes begin with thinking that is different; with seeing that is different. Wheatley in her book helped us revisit our thinking in a wonderfully practical way. I had read about the new sciences, and about how scientific and religious world views might in fact not be so far apart as had previously been thought. But I hadn't read anyone who brought that together in terms of what it might mean for how we organize human endeavours. With Descartes and Newton 300 years ago, we learned to think of our world and each other as a machine, as enormous clockwork. Ever since, that metaphor has influenced how we do things. We believe that we can organize and orchestrate our world just like the clockmaker can design and create a clock and make it work to his exact commands. However, the real world is not a clock or machine, nor are our organizations – they are communities of people, living and working together. Yet we have tried to design and manage them as machines. That includes many of us who are working for positive social change.

When I look back at AIESEC, I see an incredibly old-fashioned organization trying to run itself in a very mechanical way. At the best of times, AIESEC wanted to do good, but was

stuck in a way of thinking and doing that actually did not make space for the wonderful messiness of Life, for the genius creativity of members with tangent ideas, for members following individual inspirations and, in so doing, adding to the energy and power of the organization.

I saw the same problems, to an even greater extent, in the United Nations during our work with the UN in preparation for the World Summit in Copenhagen. The actual task of finding solutions together to the huge social challenges our world faces was almost lost in the bureaucracy used in the UN. It was lost among the wonderful networks of people trying to change the way business is done, as well as at the heart of business itself; among the NGOs working directly on issues of poverty. I was later to meet many young pioneers who had joined such organizations, fired up with a desire to do good... But then leaving these places dis-illusioned, after couple of years, because the hierarchy, bureaucracy and formality of the structures and methods seemed to suffocate the creative fire of actually accomplishing good work in the world. We were caught up in a way of doing (planning, process of engagement, of control, and so on) that actually did not seem to work for where we want to go.

Wheatley's ideas were used extensively during our planning sessions. In many ways, her book was a compass throughout the year, as our team set about to support AIESEC in becoming a more vision-filled, flexible, people-centred organisation. Margaret worked a lot with the idea of vision as a field, instead of a goal in the distant future. An invisible field that spans across the organization, and which inspires, informs and drives people to continue to work towards a shared sense of purpose that lives in them, not in the distant future. She emphasized the participative nature of the universe. That reality is a co-creation, and that to move anywhere, meeting and thinking together needs to occur between all involved parties.

We set out to dismantle a bureaucracy, and to work with developing the vision and DNA of the association together with its members – not as a small group of people, separated from the rest of the organisation, in a distant ivory tower, which AIESEC International was often accused of. We were looking for a DNA that would enable people to think for themselves, and to be free to respond creatively to different contexts and situations –

instead of having a rigid organisation, in which people only knew to do one or few things, regardless context or change of context.

However, we got stuck. I still don't quite know what went wrong. Perhaps we tried to move too fast, perhaps we had seen something that we weren't able to convey. Essentially, we came to realise towards the end of our year that most people were still very stuck in the old ways of seeing and doing. That people could not see how their personal visions could coincide with that of the organisation – let alone come to shape that of the organisation. That people seemed to fear the complexity of opening up to the messiness that is inherent in life, and in allowing for flexible adaptation to different situations and environments based on a strong core of purpose and principles. It seemed that they did not trust what might come out of giving the freedom to the membership to design novel and different projects from the traineeship exchange base that had existed since 1948. It seemed they did not trust the members' ability to be creative and innovative around a strong core without it meaning those members going off on an unwanted tangent for the organisation.

At the end of our one year term, people were excited by the energy and the vision and passion that we had brought to the association. Yet they missed an essential piece of what this was all about: the creation of a flexible organisation, working with a clear identity as its base, enabling varied and creative responses depending on country and situation. The team that followed ours turned around and moved back towards more structure – streamlining AIESEC operations essentially. With it, they lessened the need for people to question and ponder and bring their own passion and heart and creativity into what could have become an ever-evolving AIESEC.

It was painful and fascinating to be a part of a change process gone awry. To be face to face with an old culture resisting, not understanding the new – us not being able to communicate or facilitate well enough what we were seeing into the 50 000 member organisation. I had learned, the hard way, that the old way of understanding the world – as something orderly and structured which we can manipulate, and plan specific outcomes in, and in which the passion and spirit and heart of each person is largely irrelevant - takes deep deep unlearning to shift away from, especially when the alternative is messy and unknown and therefore full of uncertainty.

One question I left AIESEC with was, what might the world look like if everyone stopped, connected with themselves and their passions, and let it live through them? And if we then knew how to create organisations, communities, societies in which we made space for that diversity of creative expressions in community? Not letting predetermined systems and structures keep us from doing what seemed right or impelling.

I left AIESEC disillusioned and confused about my future. I suddenly felt quite clear that I could not go work for a large corporation, as had been my plan. If change was so hard as a president of an organisation, what could I do as new employee close to the bottom of the organisation?

Luckily I had time to figure out what next, as I still had a year to finish my master's degree. I returned to school, a bit weary about a final year on the school bench, but was happily surprised at what I found there. I chose all the most alternative electives, on such themes as discourse analysis and its role in helping us understand our world anew; human organization and postmodernism, as well as a wonderfully inspiring course on learning organizations. I was thoroughly challenged by progressive professors and fellow students – to think, to be critical, to learn to step into unknowing and through that to find new knowledge and insight, instead of simply choosing themes for which I had a set assumption that I set out to confirm. I appreciate what seems to be happening in small corners of the Business School of Copenhagen, a real space for learning is growing out of the cracks and crevices left unnoticed by the otherwise very business-oriented school.

Learning Through My Thesis

I found a wonderful professor, Chris Steyart, whom I chose as my thesis advisor, and set out on a learning journey around my question of Bringing the Human Spirit to Work. How is that done? And what might the world look like if we were all to do what we were called to do, instead of doing what the system bids us to do?

It was at this time I started working with Oscar (a Brazilian executive) and Margareta Barchan (CEO of Celemi, a Swedish learning company). Our work was a similar, though more practically-oriented exploration: How might more of the young fire souls who come

out of AIESEC (and other youth/student led movements) stay connected to that passion, those ideals, and those values as they enter the so-called real world of work? Both Oscar and Margareta felt that the gradual re-modelling of young graduates to fit the corporate environments they entered was a huge loss in terms to the organizations. Instead of making the most of the potential creativity, innovation and energy for positive change that young employees could bring to the organizations, they chose (often unconsciously) to stifle and remove it.

So, in my master's thesis I explored the journeys of those people whom I felt drawn to for being somewhat contrary to dominant culture and who were obviously doing their own thing with a shared elegance, beauty and truth. At the same time, I was also in ongoing conversation with AIESECers and other friends and peers around what might help them stay alive to their flame and passion, even as they were walking the corridors of large impersonal bureaucracies. My thesis became its own being, drawing me further and further into a learning about the process of genuine life and true living as well as into an ever deepening learning around myself and my beliefs and assumptions.

What I already knew was the power of purpose. What AIESEC had started to teach me was around the power of process. Good intentions alone are not enough. We also need to engage in different and more life-giving ways. I was learning this at very practical levels: I was meeting people whose work it was to organise events and change processes in much more democratic and messy ways, that truly allowed for the ideas and desires of the people participating. This included the use of open space technology to help people self-organise around a shared need; café conversations for informal gathering, with the potential to give real rich and juicy insights; the use of circle to truly gather in council, and the combined use of all of these methods (and more) to bring a change of culture to an entire organization, allowing people to actually meet and work out for themselves what is needed and how to bring it about.

At a spiritual level I was realizing that my understanding of reality — and my place therein — was limited. Reality was infinitely more alive, intelligent and magical than I had ever suspected to be possible.

“I was on the way before, but I must have been wearing sunglasses, and ear plugs and a clip on my nose. A woolly hat and many layers of clothes. I think I have been cracked open to a larger world. Somehow I have managed to step outside of the invisible shell that used to hold me, and that I never even knew existed...”

- from a journal entry from those days.

Already during AIESEC I was waking up to my spiritual self and yet it became more of a real and lived experience towards the end of my thesis process. I found myself entering into a state of flow, and openness, and true listening into what wanted to be written through me. My thesis was not My thesis. Rather I was its instrument, and as I gave myself over to the writing of this piece on what it means to bring the human spirit to work (during which I believe I allowed my own spirit to come to work), I learned to dance with the universe. I began to experience the intelligence and love inherent for all of us in the universe.

“Unusual links are forged; I meet people whom I know I will meet again... and even work with; I meet people whom I had no idea I would ever meet again. ‘Don't sleep in, the world is waiting to give you more gifts.’ No sooner is a question formulated in my mind before the solution appears, just around the corner, or across the street. There it is. Will I pick it up? Yes. Of course. Maybe it has always been this way. Perhaps my sunglasses, and the woolly hat have simply kept me from it.”

I realized that at the end of my long journey I had not arrived anywhere new. I had merely reached a place that many people have already been to before me, and that I was touching on essences more than anything else. A little extract follows below:

Go to where your heart bides you go. Do only what fires you up. Find what you really care about and live a life that shows it. Live with the tingling!

Know that your life is meaningful, and that there is a special reason for you to be here. Find that meaning, and let it transform your life.

Find your gift. What is your gift? Give it to the world. Express it. Sing it! Sing it loud and clear. Go only where you can exercise your gift.

Choose who you want to be. Where are you going to draw the line? Draw it! And don't cross it.

Simple and yet incredibly tough.

Find a friend, find many, who will support your crazy explorations, who are there to tell you that you are not insane, who are there to tell you how great you are even as you go against the ideas and expectations of the entire world.

And when the going gets really tough, take time for silence and connection to the vaster space inside and around you. Go for a walk in nature, meditate, go for a run, take a hot tub bath. Whatever it is that you do to wind down. Don't turn on the TV to zone out instead of zoning in.

Come into the moment. Take time to arrive wherever it is you are. At the breakfast table, marvel over the beauty of the food before you, in the board room, what have you gathered here today to do, in groups of friends, at the communion you share.

Live now, with consciousness.

Embrace yourself as the miracle you are. Allow yourself to shine (shine on you crazy diamond!), to laugh and to love. Embrace yourself as the miracle you are.

Today. Not tomorrow. Today. Tomorrow does not exist. It slips into today forever evading us.

I think I was equipped in a deeper way to embark upon the experiment of creating Pioneers of Change by the time I completed my thesis and moved to Brazil to do just that.

Pioneers of Change...

Oscar believed that the younger generation might be able to see something that the older generation could not see. He believed that young people could to create a system other

than the one that prevails. Something which those caught up in the system might have difficulty doing. It is not that we assume ourselves, because we are younger, to be completely innocent and uncontaminated, but we assume ourselves to be closer to being able to step outside of a system that so obviously does not work. A system that generates many illnesses, including poverty, war, economic warfare, domestic violence, anger, crime. He spoke of our work as a return to innocence. A waking up: The system has us living in a state of illusion, and we need through discernment and critical thinking to develop our consciousness and to awaken from that illusion. Certain things most of us currently just accept. "Oh, this can't be changed, it is so ingrained in the system." But if it does not work, and if it does not serve us, we need to be able to see it for what it is. And let that be the first step to potentially changing it.

Often we're told that the Real world is the world of the status quo, of business as usual. The world which we might not truly understand or fathom because we're too young. With our work in Pioneers, I came to realise that the Real World might in fact be the world of presence, in which we truly live in the here and now, more awake, and more in touch with ourselves, each other, and nature. The real world. And perhaps through that presence we might be able to create and recreate practices and ways of doing things that are affirming to Life, with all that she entails. The Real World of presence and connection and meaning is truly a rich rich world, as I have come to know over years of building the community of Pioneers, and of life-affirming leaders across the world, and more recently an African village in Zimbabwe. It is not devoid of pain and suffering, but that makes it no less rich, and probably just more meaningful.

Oscar asked us the question, "Which are the systems that will help us create heaven on earth?" I really like that question. It assumes that it can be, that we can have a heaven on earth; now let us put our minds and hearts together to experiment with and figure out which systems will help us create that possibility of a world that can work for everyone. That is not to say we are looking to create one strict utopia, which should look the same for every country and every people. It is simply to say that, driven by a belief that things can be different, that they can be better, we might be able to create something truly beautiful through our diverse yet collective efforts.

And so over the following years, we began to create, in *Pioneers of Change*, pockets of another way of approaching life, that resonated with our understanding of possibility, and allowing for the creativity and meaning of each person to shine through.

Different pioneers have benefited from and engaged in the network in very different ways. Many have left because we were not 'offering' enough, and yet *Pioneers of Change* has never been an offering, so much as an invitation to join us in our own search, for how we might come to change the systems and structures that they may come to work in the service of life and all living beings. What *Pioneers of Change* is becoming, as the network matures, is a learning community – an active learning community of those people who are willing to invest in the on-going search and experimentation of how we can organise differently; and what that looks like in our respective spheres.

I believe that we need to stop contributing to that which is obviously operating by life-destroying values.

I have felt concerned with some people who are an obvious part of the network, but who to me are also falling back into the dominant system – its comfort and cushiness and are not even aware of it. How to address them, and that concern, without being judgmental? I realise that ours is a crucial age. This is when we form families, settle down, begin to acquire... and this is the time when it is so easy to loosen up a little on the ideals, or on the principles that have guided us thus far. I see it happening in many people around me, and I am not quite sure how to respond.

As I stay connected with my own learning, I realize that I need to accept the choices my friends are making. I realize that perhaps it is not so much about where specifically they find themselves, or what they are doing, as it is about where their impulses are coming from, and whether they are operating from their greater or smaller versions of themselves. My contribution to them then can be to support them in being true to themselves, and in helping them open to spirit, rather than challenging them directly on specific choices. Freire's quote, "What if we discover that our present way of life is irreconcilable with our vocation to become fully human?" becomes a compass. I choose to support others, and direct myself in my own life – in becoming more fully human – which may mean leaving behind elements of this life, and moving into something new.

Along these lines, I am excited by our ideas developing around the Hypocrites Club. This club is for those who have acknowledged that they themselves are so much a part of the problem that they are trying to address, that the system lives in us, both in our minds as well as in our way of life. And as we, a number of Pioneers, metaphorically join the Hypocrites Club, our aim is to continue raising the bar of what is acceptable and what is not, to try to move further and further into living by another truth and another reality. The Hypocrites Club is teaching me, that it is not so much about changing the world as it is about changing my relation to it, and my way of life. As I live in ways that feel good and right to me, I often create a ripple effect. Vegetarianism, meditation, composting, are all small examples of areas in which I believe I have had a positive influence on friends. But even without this external impact, my practice of meditation in particular is enabling me to engage with my work, colleagues and family in a more patient, clear, and rewarding manner. It is giving me a larger reservoir of acceptance of uncertainty and messiness, which are a part of life. And in that acceptance — and the calm that it brings — I find myself being more open to and aware of possibility and opportunity as it arises along the way.

Here, I also think Gandhi has so much to teach us. That little man who, by being so clear on his values and how each of his acts was either in line or not with his values, brought down – not overnight – the British rule over India. That’s a pretty big opponent, that was in fact a system. And he played the game of being 100 % integral to who he was in everything he did. Could we play that game too as Pioneers? And what would striving towards that on a daily basis mean for our choices – consumption, work-wise, relationship-wise...?

Stepping Deeper into What the Universe Was Asking of Me

Part of what that meant for me was to leave my full time role at Pioneers of Change, and to return to my beloved Zimbabwe to do work that had for some time been calling me, and which now called louder and louder. So almost a year earlier than intended, I switched my base and moved back to Zimbabwe. I was still working for Pioneers of Change, but with the intention to phase out my involvement there as a full time

coordinator, and to step into the creation of an African learning village. I can't explain my reasoning. I simply knew in my heart that it was time for me to come home and do this.

I returned to a country seemingly facing imminent collapse. We are now well into that process – political violence is ripe, with the government being the main aggressor, by passing legislation and following up with the police, effectively turning Zimbabwe into a police state and dictatorship. Many NGOs are being shut down, rural communities are afraid of receiving visitors or hosting gathering larger than a handful of people, as they are often broken up and the initiators are brought to book soon after – even if the gathering was not political in nature. The economy has fallen apart, leaving us with critical shortages of basic commodities, including, maize-meal, cooking oil, wheat and bread, salt, sugar, fuel and more, after being the breadbasket of southern Africa for years. Was it madness that prompted me to return at this time?

It is simple. With my return to Zimbabwe, I stepped into what the universe was asking of me. That was and continues to be my experience of what this is all about. I have had some sort of vision of this for many years – though it only fell into place last year when I celebrated my 30th birthday with 40 friends from around the world. I knew then that it had to be here and it had to be now.

What my birthday brought home to me — as we all celebrated together in my grandmother's rural village in Mhondoro — was that people here have something to offer the rest of the world too. People here have challenges, and they are struggling. But in the midst of that, they have such a wealth of culture and community and approach to life that is critical for the rest of us to tune into and understand deeply, if we wish to move forward in more sustainable ways. They themselves also need to recognize these treasures as treasures. The colonial chapter seems to have left people deeply wounded and disbelieving of their own wealth and power.

I moved back because I suddenly had the sense that this was what I had to do. I had to go back and create something real. I didn't really know what it was that I had to create — some kind of learning community, an opportunity for us all to realize what we can do when we come together.

I announced to the world that this was what I was doing, and then I thought, “Oh my god, now I have to do it, and I don’t even know exactly what it is.” I traveled to different places in Zimbabwe, I met people, I told them this was what I was doing. I sat down with my sister and said, “I think we need a date. We need to say we’re going to start something at this point.” And so we announced, “We’re going to start a program on May 4th. We’re going to bring people to live at the village, and together we will explore how we can create sustainable communities.”

And then things just started moving. Everything we’ve done so far has been created by people who want to support this — in terms of money, as well as know-how and time from friends, family and people who have since become friends, that have been attracted by what we are up to here. It wasn’t easy to ask for help from friends initially, but I have since come to realize that they actually appreciate being invited into the experiment.

In July of 2002, our first 15 students arrived for a three-month learning program for leadership and self-reliance. And it has been just an incredible experience for all of us. It has been an experiment in seeding a learning community in which we live that life, which we believe to be possible; in which we experiment with a microcosm of another way of being and doing together. We’ve cooked together, planted our food together, built the village together, read articles of what others are learning and doing across the world, explored the nature around us, explored ourselves – Who am I and what are my gifts? — explored our communities – What is their potential, what is their richness already now? — learned practical skills of soap making, candle making, organic agriculture, project management, and more. It is hard to summarise. We are living and learning and doing and being.

In a way, it is funny to look back and see my journey. From being the president of a 50 000 student organization, to being a co-creator and facilitator of a network of 1000, to now being the creator of a small learning village which hosts 15 people at a time. And yet it feels like though the scale is diminishing in one sense, it is growing in another. What we are doing at Kufunda seems more real than anything I have done to date. It is not theory, it is the real thing. It is not only conversation, it is also about actually learning to live and work together, and to create something from that (food, the furniture we need, our soap, etc.). I feel like what we are learning here is incredibly important, and that perhaps some

of the deeper changes I am seeking have to happen in smaller groups over longer periods of time.

"In such a place, education necessarily becomes the preparation for a complete life of man, which can only be possible by living that life, through knowledge and service, enjoyment and creative work."

- Rabindranath Tagore

It's not as pretty as it may sound. Sometimes I lose touch with the source of my inspiration, and often I found myself to be someone who I don't even recognize, managing in a very old-style command control way (especially when we were physically building the village before the program start). One time, something went wrong with the building, and the workers — four big Zimbabwean builders — were trying to explain it to me. "We thought this, that, and the other and da da da da." I'm standing there, just fuming, and I scream, "My word is law! Do you understand that?!" And they stopped and just looked at me, and I thought, "Did I just say that? What is happening to me? Where to with life-affirming values?"

While my not being the perfect life-affirming leader is still a challenge, my source of inspiration is increasingly coming from the community we have created. My key learning from Kufunda is that as we rebuild the fabric of our communities, we will find ways of moving forward. This is what I am learning alongside the students. We need to come back together again. I believe this to be as true for the West as it is here in Zimbabwe. We need to learn to work together again, and play, and learn, and simply be. To join in community again. Such power is available as we learn this, and move into it. As we support each other, we grow stronger as a group, and as individuals. As we recognize that we each have something of value to offer the community, our sense of self-worth grows and our process of unfolding, too, just like a flower opening up.

The first program is over. In it we created an experience for the participants of personal unfolding, of expanding their ideas for what is and what might be in their communities, and of actually living the experience of just how much more is possible when we work together in community.

The experience left me with deep learning and several questions.

What I learned is...

- That deep reaching shifts and changes are possible in relatively short periods of time – especially when people actually live together (as opposed to going home each evening), but
- That it is difficult – if not impossible - to wrap it all up in three months.
- That a big part of creating shifts and changes in people is to create the container, the conditions, in which it can occur; in which deep listening can take place, in which people can speak from their hearts; in which they can meet deeply; in which they can co-create... and then allow them to surprise themselves with all that they manage to make happen.
- That continued support is needed to help people integrate their learning, new understanding, practical intentions into their lives back home (this is a learning curve we have just set out on).

Some of the students have stayed on, and it looks like Kufunda will become a real on-going community. We are beginning to explore how we might create a community currency; we have just planted our fields so that we can move closer to being self-sufficient in food; and we are experimenting with ecological sanitation. We are enjoying being in this experiment of community building and learning together.

As I have made this move to Kufunda, I have deepened my experience of being held, and loved, and cared for by the universe. It is the most profound shift of all my previous unlearning experiences. I am dancing with Life. I am but her servant, though I forget it all the time, and return to the fear, of not having enough, of not being able to pull this through, and so on. But it has always worked out so far, and the further I go into this, the more I realize that I and Kufunda are indeed held and supported by the universe. The most recent experience of this was in November 2002, when our coffers were empty and I had no idea where we would get the funds to keep going. A simple call to friends brought an overwhelming response that is still keeping us going strong. The way that people turn out to be amazing gems, who keep showing up at the right time, is another example of this sense of being watched over.

And the other Kufundees are waking up to that sense too. Not simply that they may be held by the universe, but also that they are needed by the universe. Each one of us is precious and has a role to play in the drama of life. In a session, one of the students actually laughed out loud, "What if the future is waiting for me?" And his eyes sparkled and his whole body expressed his excitement at the possibility that his life was truly meaningful, in fact critical, for the future to be a better place than the present.

It is a crazy and dark time here in Zimbabwe, and increasingly we find ourselves bringing into our circle prayers for those who are suffering most in this beautiful country. I can't help but wonder how it will all end. Right now, we are in the middle of a vicious downward spiral. And in the midst of it, we and others like us, are walking in the opposite direction. It feels good. It feels strong. And I hope we can look back one day and see that with our simple experience of building a community of light in this time, we were a part of turning things around. I really hope so.

I actually think this will be the case.

It is possible to walk against the grain, open to another way, letting life flow through us.

I still sit with many questions and unclarity: How detached can we be from the formal economy? What does it take to build an on-going life affirming community? How do you avoid creating a dependency syndrome as you step into people's lives and offer to help them? How do you shift a cultural conditioning that, for the past 100 years, has told a people that their culture is backward and primitive? How do you shift from looking at all the overwhelming problems to the possibilities?

And I am so thoroughly enjoying the journey of looking for the answers.